

Lithuania's Example

LONG IN THE habit of demanding that its adversaries yield "self-determination" to their restive ethnic groups, the Soviet Union is now under increasing siege to grant this boon to restive groups of its own. The trend can only pick up as democratization in the country spreads, arming one group after another with the means of expressing its choice. This is the plain import of the only multiparty election to be held in the Soviet Union since the father of the Bolshevik revolution, Vladimir Lenin, finding the results not to his liking, canceled the first 72 years ago.

In elections to the Lithuanian republic's legislature last Sunday, the Sajudis independence movement anointed 72 of the 90 declared winners. The Communist Party had prepared itself for its baptismal electoral testing by severing itself from the national party, but it was swept off the field. All this occurred despite the Kremlin's acceptance of the right of secession, proposals to redo the link between the center and the republics, offers of economic autonomy and passionate pleas by Mikhail Gorbachev himself. Hearing all this, most Lithuanians said, in effect, no thanks; we want our independence—taken away by Moscow in the Hitler-Stalin Pact 50 years ago—restored. A formal request is not far off.

Lithuania wants something akin to divorce by proclamation. Mr. Gorbachev, having forsworn force and raw threat, is trying to turn the focus to process. He would require independence to be approved by a 75 percent popular vote (20 percent of the people in Lithuania are not Lithuanians, 40 percent of those in Estonia are not Estonian, 50 percent of those in Latvia are not Latvians) and to be phased in over five years. He would open talks on splitting the property, protecting minority rights and other essential particulars. As recently as last summer, this prospect seemed dangerous to Lithuania and potentially shattering to the Soviet Union, but now it has the look of something attainable on the one side and survivable on the other, with luck and care.

Americans and others are conscience-bound to salute peoples inside the Soviet Union who are claiming or reclaiming their national independence. The peoples themselves must work out the terms under which they will henceforth live. It is in this sense, and only in this sense, that the ferment in the Baltics and elsewhere can fairly be described as an "internal" Kremlin problem, in President Bush's phrase. Otherwise it represents the aspiration of the human spirit.